

News From the Legislature ■ ■ ■ ■

One Step Closer to a New 520 Bridge

The Legislature narrowly approved HB 2211 which authorizes early tolls to finance the SR 520 floating bridge and gives the Washington State Department of Transportation authority to spend toll-backed bonds for the floating bridge portion of the project.

Both Rep. Deb Eddy and I voted no on the legislation. We appreciate and support efforts to get early tolling underway, but have concerns about the larger issues ignored in the bill.

First, the approaches on the Eastside are ready to go, yet this legislation does not allow any of the early tolling revenue to fund it. I can't support legislation that essentially holds our project hostage while disagreements about what to do on the other side of the lake are resolved.

Second, it is clear that tolling 520 alone will not raise enough revenue to completely fund the project. Third, I'm concerned about traffic diversion to I-90 turning that bridge into a parking lot.

Rep. Eddy and I proposed alternative legislation, HB 2319, earlier in the session that included triggers for when tolling on the I-90 floating bridge would occur. We both feel it necessary to have some kind of mechanism for tolling on I-90 to ensure the Legislature can readily respond to issues regarding revenue and traffic diversion.

My biggest concern is by blocking the use of toll revenues for construction work on the Eastside projects we could wind up with a tollbooth to a floating dock, with no throughput improvement.

While it's great that we've made an important step forward on funding for the project, we have a commitment from Speaker of the House Frank Chopp to work on changes that better meet the needs of the Eastside.



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2009 SESSION WRAP

Rep. Ross Hunter
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Town Hall
Mark your calendar!

June 11th at 7 p.m.

Redmond City Hall
15670 NE 85th St.

Sign up for e-newsletters
E-mail me at Hunter.Ross@leg.wa.gov
and ask to subscribe to my email updates.

News From the Legislature

State Representative **Ross Hunter**

48th Legislative District



2009 Session Wrap



Dear Neighbors,

The 2009 session was probably the most difficult of the seven sessions I've served as a state representative. Despite taking responsible steps to save more than \$670 million in reserves and keeping our economy afloat longer than most other states, the painful impacts of the national recession hit home this past year.

The \$9 billion shortfall our state faced this year was the largest in modern times. Housing prices throughout our state have dropped dramatically. Unemployment has risen to more than nine percent, leading record numbers of people to seek help for basics such as rent and food, or to think about starting over and going back to school.

It's times like these that remind us to focus first on our top priorities. With 98 state representatives each having a different idea of what those priorities are, it's not usually as easy as it sounds, but it's what we tried to do in Olympia this year.

I take my job very seriously and thank you for the honor of working for you. I'm back in my Bellevue office and welcome your questions and comments.

Sincerely,

Rep. Ross Hunter

Committees

Finance (Chair)
Ways & Means
Education Appropriations

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Town Hall
You're Invited!

When: June 11th at 7 p.m.

Where: Redmond City Hall
15670 NE 85th Street

Representative **Ross Hunter** • *48th Legislative District*

Redefining “Basic Education” and Rewriting the Way We Fund It

In 1978, the courts confirmed that our state has a constitutional obligation to fully fund “basic education.” As a result, the state wrote up more than a dozen complicated formulas to calculate how much the state sends districts for everything from pupil transportation to special education.

In 1993 the Legislature decided to enact learning standards.

Since that time, neither the funding system nor the learning standards have kept up with what we know our students need today to thrive in a global, information-based economy.

Today, our funding system fails to account for the real costs of a quality education. The state doesn’t factor in enough funding for computers and technology. The state doesn’t fund enough classes for even a straight-A student to qualify for admission to the UW. When we give teachers raises, we actually place a financial hardship on districts. This can’t go on.

And it won’t. For more than three years I’ve worked alongside very dedicated legislators, teachers, parents and other education advocates to find a better way of funding our schools (I’ve written about this in almost every newsletter for the past few years).

This session we passed House Bill 2261 which lays out the most sweeping changes to our K-12 system in 30 years. The bill as passed:

- **Expands the definition of “basic education,”** the single most important tool we have in protecting K-12 funding because it establishes our legal responsibility to fund our education system. The new definition requires the Legislature to fund the classes required for a student to enter into college or a career when they graduate (24 credits, 6 classes a day).
- **Ensures a new level of transparency and clarity in budgeting.** The new budgeting system will more appropriately calculate the amount of money necessary to fund our K-12 system and makes it clear what we’re asking schools to do with that money.

“ The passage of the Basic Education Bill creates the architecture for a world class education system in Washington State. I am proud of the work our legislature has done to move this work forward, an important first step to ensure that every student in our state has the opportunity to successfully compete in the new economy. ”

— Dr. Chip Kimball,
Superintendent,
Lake Washington School District

► For background information, visit www.leg.wa.gov/Joint/Committees/BEF/

- **Sets a clear timeline for implementing the changes.** Changes that affect one million kids and accounts for more than 40 percent of our state budget will take time and thoughtful effort.
- **Requires the Board of Education to create a comprehensive system for improvements** targeted at challenged schools and districts that have not demonstrated sufficient improvement through the voluntary system.
- Directs the Professional Educator Standards Board to work with teachers to **create a meaningful teacher certification program** that links performance standards to student learning.

Budget Overview – Responsibly Balancing a Historic Shortfall

I’m a numbers guy. I chair the House Finance Committee and sit on the Economic Revenue and Forecast Council. Budgets and numbers surround me every day. This year, the numbers were not fun to look at.

As the national recession has worsened, so too has our state’s bottom line. Sales tax collections, our largest revenue source, have plummeted. By the time legislators started work on a new state budget, the shortfall rose to \$9 billion, or 27% of our state budget.

For the first time in recent history, we passed a budget smaller than the one preceding it, despite growth in underlying costs and caseloads. We agreed on a responsible budget that largely protected the priorities of Washington’s people – basic education, health care for our children, and a safety net for our most vulnerable. It was a difficult process, and there’s more to hate than there is to like about the budget. I think we accomplished what we needed for these very tough times.

Here is a very small sample of steps we took to balance the budget:

- Froze pay for all state employees, including teachers.
- Cut I-728, the classroom-size reduction initiative, by about 50 percent.
- Eliminated 40,000 slots from the state’s Basic Health Plan, cutting the program by about 40 percent.
- Allowed colleges to raise tuition by as much as 30 percent over the next two years, but expanded funding for the State Need Grant to minimize impacts to lower-income students.
- Used about \$2.7 billion in federal stimulus funding for key programs such as Medicaid and temporarily increasing unemployment benefits.
- Kept \$670 million in reserves.

Want more budget information?

One-stop shop for budget info:
fiscal.wa.gov

Federal stimulus overview:
housedemocrats.wa.gov/federal_stimulus.asp

Stronger Gun Safety Laws for People With Mental Illness

It’s been more than two decades since the Legislature approved any kind of gun safety legislation. That changed this year when we passed HB 1498 to prohibit possession of a firearm by any mentally-ill person involuntarily committed for 14 or more days.

Current laws restrict possession only for those involuntarily committed for 90 or more days.

I worked on this bill for two years. It brings Washington into compliance with the federal Brady Law and establishes a clear process for such persons to regain their right to possess firearms after seeking voluntary treatment. It was that due process provision that moved the National Rifle Association to drop their opposition to the bill.

Previous attempts by other legislators to pass similar legislation were frequently stalled and ultimately defeated. But HB 1498 passed with overwhelming bi-partisan support.

Washington Ceasefire reports the new law will keep guns out of the hands of approximately 4,000 Washington residents found to be in need of mental health treatment.



Local Options to Help King County Bridge Budget Gap, Preserve Services

King County, like most counties in our state, has a budget problem. They are looking at a \$50 million shortfall for 2010.

While it’s certainly true that part of its budget problem is attributable to bad spending habits, the much larger problem comes from long-festering annexation problems (about 30 percent of the problem) and structural issues (about 60 percent).

We passed SB 5433 to provide all counties more flexibility in how sales and property taxes are raised and spent. It allows King County to use existing revenues to pay for and protect things like drug courts and mental health services, and provides a set of tax incentives to solve the annexation problem.

This was a priority bill for me and while I agree much remains to be done to bring King County’s spending in check, I’m happy that we can protect vital county services.